

# The Moment After

PAST POSTMODERNISM,  
ART FINDS A NEW SOUL  
BY EDWARD M. GOMEZ



s postmodernism spent? In recent years, the theory's postulates and poses, which have long dominated critical discourse in the arts and humanities, have shown signs of fatigue. To be sure, postmodernist doctrines still underlie the assumptions and assertions of many a college course, academic text or museum exhibition. Nevertheless, like other art or idea trends that have come and gone, these days, hardcore postmodernist thinking may be passing through something of a transitional period. Its main, exhaustively articulated arguments have become familiar assumptions. In some ways, it seems less vital in an era in which physical security has become a worldwide, top-priority concern, and in which, for many people in many places, cross-cultural experiences in multicultural environments are no longer novelties but the stuff of everyday life.

In the heyday of postmodernist critical analysis in the United States, a veritable academic industry developed around it. Some "pomo" practitioners set their critical sights on how language works in society, on how it helps shape atti-

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Donna Sharrett, detail of "Hundreds of Memories: The 24th Memento," 1999  
Roses, beads, synthetic hair 31" x 31"

tudes and perceptions. Others penned jargon-filled pensées on such topics as "the optical unconscious," "the hegemony of the code" or "disciplinarity." Often, pomo-charged academicians gave the impression that this body of thought and its application to various disciplines was somehow difficult or daunting.

But in fact, the basic tenets of postmodernist analysis derived from the simple assumption that the meanings of words, gestures, clothing, advertising, works of art and other forms of communication—the multitude of messages we encounter and receive in the world around us—can and do vary depending on the different contexts in which we experience them.

Mainstream art of the past few decades has routinely addressed or illuminated critical ideas that flow from this premise. Now, though, after postmodernism's long, influential run in the visual arts, some contemporary artists seem to be asking through their work if postmodernism still has something urgent to say. Some are bypassing it to explore themes that strict theory could not or would not address, such as spirituality. That such work is being made and is emerging on the mainstream art scene at all suggests that these early-21st-century times might be calling for fresh approaches to and attitudes about art, both from art-makers and from the "art professionals" who document, analyze, present and market what artists produce.

Apparently, questioning postmodernism's assumptions is something that its more polemical purveyors generally have been reluctant to do; for a critical method that purported to be widely relevant and applicable, postmodernist theory has rarely seemed to train its analytic eye on itself.

Now, though, artistic currents are emerging that appear to be moving beyond theoretical formulas and dictates, beyond made-to-shock exercises like Damien Hirst's pickled farm animals or Tracey Emin's food-stained, unmade bed. As they look ahead, art-makers, critics and arts journalists alike may also find—or actively seek—occasions to look back and reflect upon just what postmodernism meant during its heyday. They may want to consider what its legacy may be during a period of transition—if, indeed, such a period is what society and culture are now passing through—to a post-postmodern way of

thinking about and creating art as well as other forms of cultural expression and communication.

#### IRONY, MESSAGE AND MEANING

UNDERSTANDABLY, A THEORY that is preoccupied with what something means, depending on the different contexts in which it is presented, can become obsessed with appearances. So it is that the so-called postmodern moment has been that of a winking, ironic Peeping Tom. Voyeurism and irony became distinctive characteristics—and, often, the subjects—of work made from a postmodern point of view. Consider, for example, magazine advertisements for trendy fashion brands. In the 1980s and 1990s, rather than highlighting the clothing with conventional, straightforward images, many such ads showed models in uncertain stages of dress or undress; they resembled still photos from unfamiliar movies or snapshots from disjointed narratives. They were emphatically ambiguous. They called more attention to a magazine reader's act of looking at photo-filled ads than they did to the clothes the ads ostensibly promoted.

One advertisement from the late 1990s showed dully outfitted Chinese workers shuffling through a complex of dreary concrete buildings. They could be seen walking past—and ignoring—a colorful billboard that loomed overhead. The big sign featured white, Western teenagers cavorting in sexy Diesel jeans. Here, too, the real subject of this advertisement was the act of looking. It was about looking at someone engaged in not looking (the Chinese workers' non-gaze—get it?). Another subject of this ad-within-an-ad was the in-your-face confrontation of the drudgery of the “developing world” and the self-indulgent affluence of the “First World.” For purveyors of such messages, that kind of cheekiness passed for cleverness, or content or style.

Toying with the potentially edgy impact of an anything-goes, mix-it-up, pastiche-encouraging aesthetic, postmodernist artists photographed themselves in costumes (Cindy Sherman), posed and photographed women in their under-

wear in pricey hotel rooms (Helmut Newton), made poorly executed, painted versions of photo-like collages (David Salle), created sloganeering poster/placards (Barbara Kruger), or simply copied already existing, familiar images made by other artists (Sherrie Levine), thereby challenging the notion of authorship. (Levine's gestures also questioned the meaning of artistic originality, a key element of modernist aesthetics, and that of authenticity itself.)

What lies on the surface of any communicated message—what a viewer or listener apprehends soon after making sense of its shape, color, sound or function—is its identifying style. In the game of curiously reflecting surfaces, shifting contexts and mixed messages that is the lifeblood of postmodern thinking, style is substance and irony is king; abundant ironies have emerged from postmodernism's probing looks at what different styles in different fields had to say and how they said it, from Victorian fashions to high-tech interior design and the heavy-breathing emotion of Harlequin romances.

Sometimes, postmodernism's exercises in style, about style, became new styles in themselves. Among them: Ettore Sottsass and the Memphis Group's furniture designs of the early 1980s (the Milan-based collective's name was taken from a Bob Dylan song lyric), which combined wildly different stylistic elements with Biedermeier-on-steroids proportions and a Looney Tunes palette; or fashion designer Ann Demeulemeester's inside-out clothes, which put interior stitching on the outside of deftly tailored jackets; or architect Frank Gehry's defiantly non-rectilinear structures with their explosive, sensuous shapes that gave physical expression to the deconstructionists' notion of opposing “polarities” within a “text.” (From a deconstructionist perspective, any work—a book, a speech, a garment, a movie, even a building—may be regarded as a “text” that can be analyzed; with this in mind, Gehry's structures can be seen as giving visible form to the energy that emerges from the tension that theoretically exists between what a building normally can or should be and what, in the case of one of his unusual creations, it actually is.)

Given postmodernism's thematic concerns, it is ironic that, in some fields, this way of thinking has evolved into little more than another manipulable style

in its own right. Nowadays, for example, it is not unusual for design-school students to turn in assignments that ostensibly show off their command of what professionals might call postmodernism's stylistic "language." ("It's postmodern!" a student at one of New York's leading art-and-design schools told me excitedly, a few years ago, about a poster she had created for a class. "It has wavy lines, multi-layered images and all different kinds of typography," she explained, as if summarizing a dutifully followed recipe.)

#### THE ROMANCE OF STYLE AND A WHIFF OF DEATH

STYLE, AS AN EXPRESSION of value, is always fleeting. The expressiveness or authority of the so-called language of style through which any cultural or intellectual creation is conveyed—a song, a painting, a speech, a building, a meal, a pair of shoes—can always be countered or topped by alternative versions of the same creation in other styles. (Hence the appeal of retro-everything; today's freshest techno look could be displaced by tomorrow's rediscovered, reinterpreted Art Deco.) The multiplicity of style languages available, at least in an open, consumerist society, to both makers and users of cultural products helps energize such communication. It makes it interesting.

At the same time, though, a way of looking at the world that asserts that the meaning of any event, gesture or other communicative act or work depends on the contexts in which it is perceived, and on the factors that shape those contexts, can lead to a potentially disturbing conclusion: that no one meaning is ever really fixed, certain or definitive. Thus, there are or can be no aesthetic, never mind historic, truths or facts, no absolute political, social, cultural or ethical values, that help determine exactly what a particular subject or message means in any particular context at any particular time.

Moreover, if varying perceptions of the meanings of what we experience can be seen as being based on differently rooted points of view and are shaped by various factors that help determine how and what we see and hear—or that we think we see and hear—then there really can be no definitive historical events

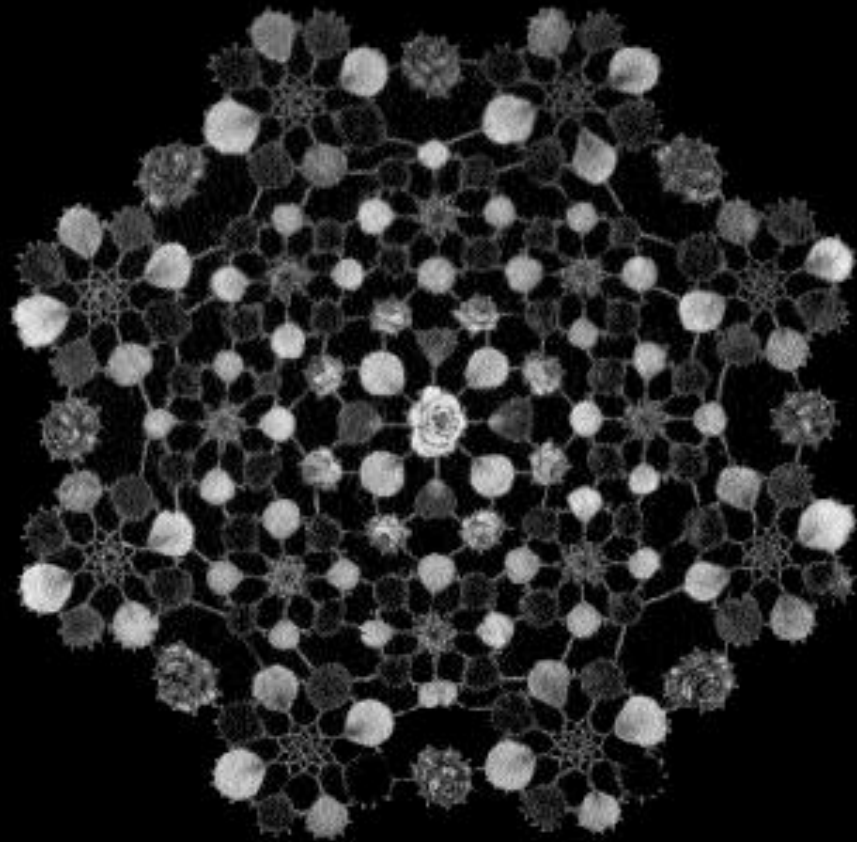
at all. The epistemological conundrum: only variously "constructed" "facts" or "truths" exist; what passes for "fact" or "truth" must forever remain a cultural (or inherently "culturally biased") "construct" in the respective minds of different individuals. In the reality-challenging cracks of such relativism, does a certain nihilism reside?

Likewise, in the free-for-all of postmodernism's abiding relativism, conventional aesthetic concerns such as an artist's technical proficiency, the overall quality of a work of art or even beauty (that old saw) became less important or were ignored. In a quip that inadvertently reflected how tired doctrinaire postmodernist theory had become, the American artist and teacher John Baldessari stated in 1996 with—or without?—irony that the theme of beauty in art once again had begun "rearing its ugly head."

Looking back, the fabric of modernist thought can be seen as a complex weave of sometimes contradictory themes and values. Among them, there was modernism's conceptualist strain, which reached something of an apotheosis in the postmodern artist Sherrie Levine's precise recreations (or "simulacra") of Walker Evans' famous Depression-era photographs of Alabama sharecroppers and in Jeff Koons' emotionally frigid, aesthetically airless vacuum cleaners. Koons displayed them, glistening and new, like fetish objects on the high altar of rabid consumerism, in dust-free, fluorescent-lit, clear-acrylic boxes. Presented with scientific attention to detail, their arch send-up of capitalist materialism (and, while they were at it, of pop art's camp-soaked irony) was obvious—and it reeked of death.

#### ART-MAKING ANEW

AFTER THE TERRORIST ATTACKS of Sept. 11, 2001, media pundits declared: "Irony is dead." The time had passed, they opined, for the winking, self-conscious cleverness that they believed had marked so much of late-20th-century American popular culture, in such forms as TV commercials and sitcom humor. Even now, though, almost a year after last September's events, irony, that



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essential sideman to sarcasm in much of what is most distinctive about American humor, seems to be inescapably present in advertising, political commentary and popular entertainment.

What has changed, however, is the American people's sense of self-confidence. News reports have noted that, to varying degrees, Americans seem to have been re-examining certain social attitudes, political positions and cultural values. For those who care about and pay attention to art, it remains to be seen how such thinking can or will affect their critical outlook or appreciation of what artists produce and present. Likewise, in times like these, those who care about art might find themselves asking: What can or should art that makes its way into the mainstream of commercial galleries, museums, leading publications, and national or international fairs and expositions say, and how should it say it? Are certain subjects, techniques or styles of presentation (or representation) in art, whatever its form, now more or less appropriate than others, and, if so, who is to say what is or is not?

Even before the events of September 2001, the work of certain artists had begun to address these concerns, intentionally or not. Both despite and because of the prevalence of postmodernist critical ideas in the art world (and, in some cases, as a reaction against them), some artists had already begun exploring themes and techniques that reflected not theory-driven polemics, but rather what might be called fundamental humanistic values.

The trend might be traced back to the late 1980s and early 1990s, when exhibitions like "Magicians of the Earth" at the Pompidou Center in Paris examined affinities between certain contemporary artworks and ritual, craft or decorative arts objects from cultures of the "developing world." Spiritual themes figured notably in the works in that show. It might also be argued that the "neo-expressionist" painting movement of the early 1980s, with its emphasis on the human figure, was an example of this nascent artistic current. Nevertheless, wherever it continued to percolate, by the late 1980s and early

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PREVIOUS PAGE: Donna Sharrett, "Before Something Else Happens: The 52nd Memento," 2001  
Roses, beads, fabric, synthetic hair, 31"x31"

1990s, tendencies like Neo-Geo, and the romance of the Internet and of digital technology, had displaced other blips of activity on the art world's trend-chasing radar screen.

What distinguishes the work of artists who are not primarily motivated by postmodernist theory, among other characteristics, are its attention to craftsmanship and its allusions to the human body, to animal life and to the relationship between human beings and nature. Often, such art also evokes or directly addresses spiritual themes; sometimes it reacts against the techno-obsessions of the digital age or attempts to “warm up” impersonal high-tech media even as it employs them in its making. Much of it seems to spring from a narrative impulse.

Such work is being made by artists like Donna Sharrett, who until recently lived in the Hudson Valley. She employs a complex hand-stitching technique to make “Mementos,” as she calls them, of dried rose petals joined in elaborate

patterns by lace-like sections of artificial hair. Flat and geometric, they resemble large doilies and bring to mind treasured objects from folk or religious rituals, although at first glance their function is not obvious.

Thomas Piché, Jr., the senior curator at the Everson Museum in Syracuse, N.Y., where an exhibition of Sharrett's work was presented two years ago, has said: “They're familiar, homey and labor-intensive; they remind me of mandalas. In Donna's art, there are irregularities that reveal the touch of the human hand.” Sharrett's work bridges the long-standing divide in American art between “fine art” and “craft.”

To develop her art, Sharrett, a former painter of abstract landscapes, did research on Victorian-era *memento mori*, including bracelets and lockets made with pieces of human hair. She studied folk traditions like Mexico's Day of the Dead festival, with its skeleton statuettes in everyday-life poses. It was her mother's unsuccessful struggle with cancer that inspired Sharrett to address death in her work. “There should be some way to memorialize,” she has said. “All of a sudden, someone is gone. You go back, and life continues. Something seemed wrong. I felt there should be a placeholder to remind us.”

In both commercial-gallery and museum settings, her “Mementos” have attracted viewers who have found their allusions to death more intriguing than repellent. “They make people remember something, even if they don't know exactly what it is,” says Sharrett, who sometimes sits in the venues where her work is on view, quietly stitching and watching viewers as they examine her wall-mounted pieces.

Sharrett says that “the repetition in this work and the way it relates to so many cultures with their repeating customs, rules and cycles” is more meaningful to her than the abstract paintings she used to make. She adds: “Maybe there's something very spiritual and necessary about this kind of repetition, or else we wouldn't have been doing it for generations.”

In Mexico, the painter Roberto Cortázar has developed a body of work that brings together classical art's realistic depiction of the human body with post-modern musings about identity and power. He uses both realist and abstract



Roberto Cortázar, “Cuatro figuras humanas dentro de una habitación, Obra 53” (Four Human Figures in a Room, Work 53), 1998, 39" x 35", mixed media on wood panel



Jon Waldo, “Seeds”, 2000, 19" X 12.5", pencil and colored pencil

techniques to paint nearly life-size nudes that appear uncannily self-aware and ready, by sheer force of will, to ruminate their way right out of the tight pictorial spaces in which they are confined.

Cortázar says: “In my work, I try to express how we feel, as human beings, at the moment that we realize we’re human not because we have bodies but because we’re conscious of ourselves.” Cortázar’s art reminds viewers that a person’s awareness of himself or herself—and of other people—is primarily a sensory, visceral, emotional experience; theories about society, psychology and relationships come later. However, he suggests, from the point at which human beings become “conscious of themselves,” they begin to develop an “awareness of their ability to govern themselves.” Much of the impact of Cortázar’s paintings comes from their preoccupation with the human form, an enduring theme in Mexican art whose roots stretch back to the region’s ancient cultures.

An emotionally intense, deeply intellectual young man, Cortázar says: “I’m familiar with postmodernist theory; I’ve read and studied its main texts. But I don’t really need it or depend on it to make my art, for in many ways, generations of Mexicans and Latin-Americans, including my own, have been familiar with the issues it brings up—history, identity, the construction and uses of culture—in ways that are more meaningful because we have been dealing with them practically, not just theoretically, and we were doing so long before this theory came along.”

The sculptor Gillian Jagger, who was born in England in 1930 and came to the U.S. as a young girl, is an artist whose work has focused on nature themes. “I’m interested in the confrontation between humans and nature,” she has said.

Jagger divides her time between a former dairy farm in upstate New York, where she keeps a barn-sized studio, and New York City, where she teaches at the Pratt Institute. She has created large-scale sculptures inspired by the shape of the land or derived from scavenged raw materials around her rural home, including sections of felled tree trunks, rusty farm implements and deer skeletons.

Jagger also works in plaster, as in a new life-size sculpture that she made of two horses that appear to be tethered to—or careening into—a freestanding

wall. Months ago, working quickly, outdoors in the winter cold, Jagger and her assistant made a mold of the body of a horse that had just died on her property. The animal’s form, now pieced together out of big, jigsaw-puzzle-like pieces of white plaster suspended by wires from the ceiling, became the central motif of the new work.

“I’m interested in nature’s forms, in the dignity, power and energy that they possess and that we humans can’t help but sense when we’re in their presence,” Jagger says. “And in that spirit that animals display in which they seem to have no guile.”

In recent years, she has made assemblages of tree trunks bound together with or suspended from ceilings by massive chains. Other works have consisted of explosive arrangements, frozen in mid-air by carefully placed, transparent strings or wires, of animal skeletons, tree branches and rusty dairy-barn stanchions (the ominous-looking hardware that is used to confine dairy cows to their narrow stalls).

Except for occasional daubs of red paint brushed into the cavity of a naturally hollowed-out trunk, Jagger rarely modifies her found materials; like an *ikebana* artist working on a monumental scale, much of her art lies in her precisely planned arrangements of massive elements and in how her handling of materials creates a heightened sense of their textures and colors, their looming physical presence and, from certain angles, their sinister allure. Because Jagger’s art so obviously originates in nature, it unavoidably refers to it, too.

Other artists who have assimilated postmodernist lessons but whose work does not overtly depart from their theoretical starting points include: Christy Rupp, whose delicate sculptures of frogs and insects, crafted from handmade, colored papers, refer to both the molecular structures and the evanescent transformations-for-survival of pollution-affected creatures; La Wilson, a 76-year-old, self-taught artist who makes wooden boxes obsessively stuffed with household knickknacks, like clothespins, hair curlers, dominoes and pencils; and Jon Waldo, a painter and ceramist whose works are influenced by folk art, graffiti, New England crafts and rock-’n’-roll.

Waldo uses hand-cut stencils made from his own simple line drawings to depict houses, toys, cars, playground equipment and other common objects from the American landscape. The work of these and other artists who share their thematic and aesthetic concerns exudes an unsentimental, unironic sense of discovery about and appreciation for the overlooked, the castoff and the ordinary; it is drawing increasing attention from curators, critics and art dealers.

In recent years, too, outsider art, or work produced by artists who are not academically trained and that expresses their strong personal visions, has become widely popular. This might be because, at its best, such art—from housepaint-on-board paintings to elaborate, recycled-waste sculptures—vividly conveys their impulsive creative energy, which can be hard to resist. Art aficionados who have become tired of postmodern polemics—do they really need another photo-based installation or didactic video to tell them how the mass media manipulate them?—have responded enthusiastically to outsider art’s unfettered, unfiltered emotion and to its often simple, even crude technical character, which many regard as unaffected and “pure.”

#### POST-POSTMODERN SOUL

SOME ARTISTS, at least in the U.S., will most likely find themselves confronting a complex mix of emotions—fear, anger, sorrow, grief, hate, suspicion—among themselves and their audiences as they continue to make and bring forward new work in a cultural environment that in some ways remains deeply touched by the events of September 2001. Some might decide either to refer directly or to allude indirectly to the historic terrorist attacks or their aftermath in their work. For that purpose, they will need to identify and find effective ways to use strong, meaningful metaphors that will allow their art to resonate with broad audiences. Their new creations will also have to avoid emulating the facile character of now-dated postmodernist works, like some of Kruger’s shrill signboards, whose propaganda-like, one-note messages were irritatingly shallow even in

their own time. (By contrast, despite their dispiriting chill, works like Koons’ vacuum cleaners seem to have had a curious staying power; their enigma is their allure.)

In any case, finding the right technical, stylistic and thematic language for the art of our times could take some time. Some artistic works or styles take longer to evolve than others, as Baudelaire once observed. In a letter to his mother composed a month after the publication of “*Les Fleurs du Mal*” in 1857, the young poet explained that his book had taken more time than he had expected to find its form. It was “created in moods of savage anger and patience combined,” he wrote. So it often goes with art-making.

For now, it is impossible to predict just how long the clouds of mixed emotion stirred up by last September’s events will linger or what kinds of art might emerge after they lift, or how the Bush government and its supporters’ ongoing efforts to suppress political debate and civil liberties might affect what artists will have to say in and about these troubled times. The still-evolving confluence of political and cultural factors that inevitably will influence some—or much?—of the art-and-entertainment products that the coming years will bring could put dogmatic theories about art and culture to challenging tests—and maybe even foster new ones.

In the meantime, facing a future that, for the U.S., as for other parts of the world, looks more disturbingly uncertain every day, artists, politicians and ordinary citizens alike are all walking in the dark. Looking ahead, the most useful theories might be those that help us all better understand and respond honestly and productively to fast-changing political and cultural realities. In this context—speaking of contexts—it may be that what art at its most valuable and imaginative can do will be to help imbue such vital understanding with a generous spirit and a sense of soothing, steadying, unsinkable soul.